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Henry Clay: The Essential American

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Review

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Heidler, David S. and Heidler, Jeanne T.. *Henry Clay: The Essential American*. Random House, \$30.00 ISBN 978-1-4000-6726-8

Resurrecting an American Political Icon

Many of the best biographers teach their readers as much about the context of their subject's life as they do the subject himself. In their new biography of Henry Clay, David and Jeanne Heidler provide such context by weaving the Kentuckian's life through a richly detailed description of early nineteenth-century America. In painting a complex and engaging portrait of "Harry of the West," a clear goal of the Heidlers is to show how Clay grew up with the new American nation, "the mirror of his country and its aspirations" (xxiv).

The Heidlers trace Clay's development from young upstart to national leader. Born in 1777, Clay spent his early years in Revolutionary era Virginia, mingling with future political leaders like Democratic newspaperman Thomas Ritchie. He learned the culture of the planter class (including their drinking, smoking, and gambling) and received a religious education. Aside from his Virginia origins, Clay also had a crucial connection to the founding fathers. The teenage Clay got his intellectual start as an apprentice to Virginia Judge George Wythe, a legendary legal scholar who had counseled the likes of Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe. Wythe served as a father figure to the ambitious young man, teaching Clay that America could become an example for the rest of the world. Clay was further impressed by the Judge's perspective on slavery; Wythe viewed the peculiar institution as a societal blight and carefully educated his slaves to prepare them for freedom. As the authors explain, Wythe set a crucial example for the young Clay, one that would stick with him into his later years.

Virginia was crowded with lawyers and politicians, however, and if Clay was to make a name for himself he had to find new ground. Like many of his contemporaries, he decided to move west, settling himself in Kentucky, where he quickly gained a reputation as a skilled lawyer; he even defended former Vice President Aaron Burr against conspiracy charges. Clay's ambition soon led him toward the path of politics and he arrived in Washington for his first stint in Congress in 1806. Clay quickly became an outstanding legislator, serving several terms as Speaker of the House and becoming a leader in the Senate. The Kentuckian was a beautiful orator: he could command the attention of enormous audiences even while speaking for several hours. More importantly, Clay was an expert at the ins and outs of congressional bargaining and leadership. He knew how to build coalitions in the House and mend political rifts in the Senate. He was "persuasive in ways that others could never match" (477). Throughout the rest of his life, Clay would become intimately involved with America's political development: while pushing for war in 1812, by helping to create the Whig Party, and in facilitating cross-sectional compromises over slavery, earning him the nickname "The Great Pacificator." "Clay's mark on the country," conclude the Heidlers, "was as indelible as his influence on its politics was profound" (xv).

Not only was Clay emblematic of the growing nation, the "Great Pacificator" became a beloved figure in American life. Clay captured the hearts of the American people like no man would again until Abraham Lincoln. In fact, the Heidlers take pains to draw comparisons between the two leaders. As an engaging and skilled politician, Henry Clay was Lincoln's "beau ideal of a statesman." Lincoln often tried to model his own career after his political hero and there were some key similarities between the "Great Pacificator" and the "Great Emancipator." Both were tremendously ambitious. Each man played up his humble origins – Clay liked to claim that he "came of age with callused hands and in chronic want" (p. 11), while contemporaries and biographers alike have portrayed Lincoln as the consummate self-made man. Clay was the first American statesman to lie in the U.S. Capitol upon his death; Lincoln would be the second.

By comparing Clay to Lincoln, the Heidlers try to restore some of the shine that Clay has lost in recent years. For example, while historians have described "Harry of the West" as calculating in his choice of a wife – Lucretia Hart was not beautiful but came from a wealthy family – the authors suggest that he preferred to "look beyond appearances" and found her "endearing, even captivating" (40). The authors convincingly show that Clay was more than a simple opportunist.

Yet, they simultaneously minimize his noted temper and considerable stubbornness. In debunking the story that Clay flew into a drunken rage after the 1840 Whig Convention nominated William Henry Harrison for President over him, the Heidlers claim Clay was actually relieved to be spared from the burdens of the position. Surely this goes too far – like many of his political contemporaries, Clay was obsessed with the possibility of becoming president, and 1840 was a year primed for Whig success.

Least convincing is their attempt to return credit for the Compromise of 1850 to Clay. Scholars of the period such as Holman Hamilton in *Prologue to Conflict* (1966) and more recently Michael Holt in *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (2003) have minimized Clay's importance to the bill, instead highlighting the efforts of men like Stephen A. Douglas (D-IL) and Henry S. Foote (D-MS). While the Heidlers admit that Clay was absent from Washington when the Compromise legislation gained traction in the Senate, they claim the settlement would not have been possible without Clay. The Kentuckian's rise in popularity throughout the country following the Compromise, they explain, shows that "the people of Clay's time knew the truth of it back then" (477). Perhaps, but Congress – not the American people – passed the Compromise, and in that arena, Clay had stumbled badly; when Clay's omnibus bill failed, he sulked and then slinked out of Washington.

Ultimately, like many Lincoln scholars, the Heidlers are so concerned with saving Clay's image that they tend to sacrifice some of his humanity. In order to prop up the Kentuckian's credentials, they downplay the abilities of his contemporaries, particularly the members of his own party who achieved the honor of the presidency. To them, William Henry Harrison had "unseemly ambition" and was "undistinguished" (326); John Tyler was "inwardly prideful" (324); and, perhaps worst of all, Zachary Taylor was "egotistical and obtuse" (426). Conversely, they argue, even Clay's opponents admired him for his openness and commitment to the country. Although certainly admired for his strengths, he too was ambitious, prideful, and egotistical. No doubt Clay was a great American, but the Kentuckian also had his shortcomings.

Rachel Shelden is completing her doctoral work at the University of Virginia. Her dissertation is entitled "Washington Brotherhood: Friendship, Politics, and the Coming of the Civil War." Shelden's article, "Messmates' Union: Friendship, Politics, and Living Arrangements in the Capital City, 1845-1861," will appear in The Journal of the Civil War Era Fall 2011.

